

Improving the Cultural Responsiveness of Visual Thinking Strategies

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Abstract

Visual Thinking Strategies is a thinking strategy created by Philip Yenawine and Abigail Housen to combat the lack of cognitive intake museum goers and art viewers felt after looking at art. Now, it is used in classrooms as well as museums to develop critical thinking skills and visual literacy amidst other skills such as communication and writing. While reviewing this thinking strategy, I wondered how it would fit and adhere to Culturally Responsive Teaching, a pedagogy curated by Geneva Gay to view academic achievement, skills, identities, and experiences by multicultural students through a holistic view rather than a deficient, “what are they lacking”, point of view. In this essay, I suggest methods to improve the cultural responsiveness of Visual Thinking Strategies in the hopes that they will create a more culturally responsive form of VTS to be used in future classrooms. I have also taken my findings and thoughts from throughout my analysis and created a photomontage which is attached and explained at the end.

Keywords: visual thinking strategies, VTS, cultural responsiveness, culturally responsive teaching, CRT, art, culture, language, visual, image, literacy, photomontage

Improving the Cultural Responsiveness of Visual Thinking Strategies

Introduction

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a teaching and discussion strategy developed by Philip Yenawine and Abigail Housen that focuses on building critical thinking skills through the analysis of art or images (Cappello & Walker, 2016; Moeller et al., 2013; Yenawine, 2013).

While building on critical thinking skills, VTS also helps build communication skills, analysis skills, and visual literacy (Cappello & Walker, 2016; Moeller et al., 2013; Yenawine, 2013).

Unlike other traditional teaching methods, Visual Thinking Strategies is more learner driven as it allows for students to participate and listen to one another's thoughts and ideas rather than just an educator's (Cappello & Walker, 2016; Moeller et al., 2013; Yenawine, 2013). Within VTS there are two roles: the facilitator and the participants. The facilitator's role is to initiate the discussion by asking the three main questions: 1) What's going on in the image? 2) What do you see that makes you say that? And 3) What more can we find? The facilitator also has the job of paraphrasing a participant's comment after the second question. This helps to contrast or connect to complimentary comments made before. The participants' role is to view and analyze an image then voice their thoughts and opinions regarding what they see with an explanation to back it up.

Cultural Responsiveness or Culturally Responsive Teaching is a pedagogy curated by Geneva Gay. Educators who follow this pedagogy believe that improving academic achievement of students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and social class groups starts from recognizing that it's not the students' background or culture that is to blame but how the system views them (Gay, 2018, p. xii). CRT also places emphasis on the holistic view of the student when it comes to their academic achievements and other skills or weaknesses (Gay, 2018, p. 15).

At first glance, the openness and structure of Visual Thinking Strategies leaves a lot of room for cultural responsiveness—the understanding and empowerment of the student’s cultures and assets or in other words, seeing the student as a whole. VTS pushes for understanding and reasoning behind one’s thoughts and what they see, hence the second question “what do you see that makes you say that?” However, as open ended as this question is, it isn’t quite enough to be culturally responsive. In Geneva Gay’s book *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2018), she writes that a fundamental aim of culturally responsive teaching is to empower students. Because of its open-ended nature, there isn’t an explicit direction for students to openly express or connect their thoughts and ideas to their backgrounds or cultures leaving an empty space where empowerment could bloom.

Adjustments to Visual Thinking Strategies

One way to empower students through VTS would be for the facilitator to continue to probe the student to be more expressive and detailed in their response. This would look like asking beyond just the “why do you say that?” or “what makes you say that” types of questions asking for more explanation which could be done by asking questions such as “does this remind you of something?” or asking for another example. To continue the empowerment process and see cultural diversity as a strength would be to juxtapose responses that specifically are tied to different cultural identities or experiences. This allows students to see that one’s background and identities are just as valid as other’s. The view of cultural diversity as a strength is a large factor of Culturally Responsive Teaching as it’s often not fully recognized and when it is, it helps improve education effectiveness (Gay, 2018, p. 15). Culturally responsive teaching also incorporates scaffolding—the use of out-of-school resources, experiences, skills, and so on as assets, building blocks, and leverage for learning in classrooms (Gay, 2018, p. 204)—and Visual

Thinking Strategies is a great tool that can do so, especially when the facilitator is actively leading the discussion to delve deeper and connect to the student's experiences.

Another method to empower students through VTS would be to allow for thoughts and ideas to be expressed in words and other linguistic forms that are comfortable to the student. This may look like encouraging students to use words in their second language such as Spanish, French, Mandarin, Korean, etc. This sharing of language not only allows the speaker themselves to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts in their own ways, but also exposes other students to cultures they may be unaware of. Language plays a key role in culturally responsive teaching as well as Gay (2018) points out, "Translanguaging also emphasizes the use of multiple languages to make schools more welcoming environments for multilingual students" (p. 105). Gay (2018) also states, "Another compelling argument of all in favor of bilingualism, bidialectism, biculturalism, and translanguaging is the interconnections among culture, language, identity, and learning" (p. 105). Essentially, by encouraging students to use their linguistic abilities or even having facilitators ask questions in the student's first and, or, second languages during VTS creates a culturally responsive environment that benefits many.

Similar to the first method mentioned above, a facilitator can move away from asking just the three main questions and instead of paraphrasing, when they hear something harmful or incorrect, to supply a *FYI* (For Your Information). This method was curated by Jeanne Hoel and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) (Hoel, 2018; Monet, 2019). The FYI tactic was curated to introduce more neutrality to the discussion when misinformation or harmful information is being presented without shaming what had been said before (Hoel, 2018; Monet, 2019). The supplying of information that helps redirect the negative comment or stereotype that

is being thought and said during the discussion is one way to add cultural awareness and responsiveness to Visual Thinking Strategies.

A fourth way that VTS could be improved in a culturally responsive lens is by being aware of what type of images are being chosen. Yenawine said himself that when he is selecting images, he is selecting the ones that people are going to “mostly get right” (Portland Art Museum, 2014). This is because he believes that people aren’t going to have fun or comfortable to talk about the art when they don’t have any prior or background knowledge of the art (Portland Art Museum, 2014). He wants the audience to be able to connect with the art that he selects (Portland Art Museum, 2014; Yenawine, 2009). In other words, it’s being “sensitive to what it is both they can do and are interested in doing” (Portland Art Museum, 2014) when it comes to the art or images that are being chosen. This practice aligns with Culturally Responsive Teaching. While Gay (2018) places a large focus on having textbooks and other core curriculum content being multicultural and accurately portraying diverse identities, they also advocate for a wide variety of content derived from various sources (p. 143). Hence, by selecting images that an educator’s students have connections to or are able to make connections to is important in more than one way. It not only allows for a diverse curriculum but also invites students to see and express themselves in media or content they wouldn’t normally.

When it comes to Visual Thinking Strategies, there is already a strong base for culturally responsive teaching to occur. However, it’s with minor adjustments seen in the role of the facilitator when it comes to continuing to delve deeper into the discussion, encouraging multilingual or multicultural uses of language, or even knowing when to correct what has been said, that truly allows VTS to be a culturally responsive learning and thinking strategy. In the end, Visual Thinking Strategies is a useful tool that can help develop critical thinking, writing

Photomontage



A photomontage is an image created by slicing, splicing, and reconstructing other images to create a new subject or image. In other words, a photomontage can be seen as a collage made

of other images. The reason I chose to create a photomontage was because I had felt that it would best portray my thoughts as I could incorporate different images or ideas that popped into my head. This freedom to choose and search for images that popped into my mind was similar to my experience with Visual Thinking Strategies. While I wasn't able to participate as either facilitator or participant in a real, live VTS session, I tried to ask myself the three main questions of VTS whenever I came across an image. Most of my immediate thoughts when answering the three questions were images or other visuals that reminded me of what I was seeing, hence the use of photomontages to place all of my thoughts onto one image. With all of the main images in each corner, I placed cutouts of other images that reminded me of the main one around it. This was to represent the way that I viewed Visual Thinking Strategies in a more visual way—images and thoughts floating around and replacing parts of the image that one is looking at.

Three out of the four main images in each corner (top left, bottom left, and bottom right) were images that are specifically chosen and used for VTS. Curated by the Mabee-Gerrer Museum of Art, located in Oklahoma, these images were under the category of suitable for all ages. Following Yenawine's belief that the images should be chosen by the level of conversation that it can spark for a specific audience, I chose two out of the three images following that logic. The images in the bottom corners were images that sparked an immediate analysis and explanation. I could instantly see and think about what the images reminded me of and so on. The bottom left corner (see Appendix A) instantly reminded me of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* because of the blue and the setting. While the image isn't an exact representation of the characters or an exact representation of a scene in the novel, it was the ambiance and the perceived setting that reminded me of the book. The bottom right corner (see Appendix B) was an image of a girl sitting in front of a television with the world in a cart behind her and owls

flying above. My immediate thought was that this image was a commentary on how we have focused on technology and placed the physical world behind us and that the owls reminded me of the Greek goddess of wisdom, Athena. The third image in the top left corner (see Appendix C) was an image that I challenged myself with as I had no immediate thoughts or reactions when I saw it. I really had to sit there and look at the image to see what was going on. In the end, I took away that the women were sitting in what seemed like direct sunlight while the men were relaxed under the sun. I also viewed the women as people of color because of their hair, clothes, and perceived skin color. At this thought, however, I did contemplate whether or not to include these images (women POC) as I wasn't a hundred percent sure if they were and didn't want to inflict any stereotypes. In the end, though, I did include them because I thought that they were also a great reminder of the FYI method of making Visual Thinking Strategies more culturally responsive.

The reason I had included the image in the top left corner was because I wanted to see if Visual Thinking Strategies really needs to use images that the participants can talk about. Although I had eventually found something within this specific image, there were other images within the curated gallery that I saw and felt myself stretching to make any connections. This cemented the idea that for a successful VTS based discussion, the images chosen to view must have some connections to the audience—culturally, academically, and so on—for genuine conversation to occur.

In the end, the goal and purpose of my photomontage was to create a visual representation of what Visual Thinking Strategies meant to me and how I could have applied some of the improvements I've made to make the thinking strategy a tad more culturally

responsive than it already was. I also hope that it sparks more discussions regarding the idea of presenting research findings and thoughts in non-traditional methods.

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Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C

